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New York

President: Mr. Al-Nasser ..... (Qatar)

The meeting was called to order at 9.35 a.m.

High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the theme "Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication"

Agenda item 19

Sustainable development

(e) Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I now declare open the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, held in accordance with resolution 65/160, of 20 December 2010. I extend a warm welcome to all participants.

Statement by the President

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): It is my distinct honour to welcome all participants to this historic High-level Meeting on addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the leadership role of the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, and of the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, Mr. Luc Gnacadja, on this important issue. I would also like to thank Member States for their tireless efforts in bringing the issue of desertification to the agenda of the General Assembly. The role of the Group of 77 and China deserves particular appreciation in this respect.

Desertification is one of the most complex challenges of our time. It has serious environmental, economic, political and social impacts that affect people, most of whom are poor. According to estimates by the United Nations Environmental Programme, one quarter of our Earth's land is threatened by desertification and the livelihoods of over 1 billion people in more than 100 countries are jeopardized by desertification.

Desertification also threatens to critically undermine gains achieved in sustainable development. The economic, social and human cost of desertification is tremendous. I therefore call upon the international community to take immediate and decisive action to address its impacts and to take measures for both its prevention and its reversal.

A silent killer, drought has hit East Africa this year, and once again the world has seen unimaginable human suffering. Countries in this region are experiencing the worst drought in 60 years. In the past three months alone, this famine has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Somali children under the age of five, and it has caused possibly permanent social disruption as people have been forced to leave their communities, villages and towns. This is the most

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severe food crisis in the world today, and it still requires urgent and concerted action at the global level.

Global attention to addressing land degradation and the scarcity of natural resource has no doubt been on the increase, particularly in connection with the challenges of climate change and the food crisis. However, our common efforts thus far have fallen short.

Major innovative policy interventions and shifts in sustainable land management strategies will be needed to address the impacts of desertification. Such interventions require moving towards an ambitious quantitative target and a zero net land degradation rate. Effective restoration and rehabilitation of degraded lands and drylands requires the development of new policies and technologies that promote sustainable use of resources, as well as predictable financial resources to support domestic initiatives. These strategies must ensure the active engagement of all stakeholders and local communities.

A number of important global conferences on sustainable development will be held this year. In October, the international community will meet in the Republic of Korea at the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. Today's discussion among world leaders is an excellent opportunity to help stimulate efforts aimed at reaching a decisive outcome at the Conference.

The twentieth anniversary of the Earth Summit, which was held in June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, is also around the corner. I urge Member States to ensure a forward-looking outcome at the Rio+20 Conference that reaffirms the balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. I would also encourage Members States to reaffirm in their deliberations the fulfilment of commitments to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and its 10-year strategic plan and framework, and to further enhance the implementation of the Convention.

Effectively addressing desertification and land degradation can be done only in the context of other major global challenges, such as climate change, poverty eradication, food security, deforestation and biodiversity loss. I would like to address one of these issues in particular today: food security.

Food security is an urgent issue before us today. Food insecurity has an impact on a daily basis on people in arid countries in particular. Many of them face severe malnutrition and undernourishment, and their health is compromised as a result. Malnutrition has a particularly lasting impact on children, as their development and growth are stunted.

Arid countries have begun to understand the importance of building their own country-led initiatives that aim to address the root causes of food insecurity. They are also collaborating to form South-South, triangular and global alliances that would allow them to share technological and policy solutions to combat desertification and the degradation of lands in all ecosystems.

I am pleased to observe a small but growing number of such initiatives aimed at addressing food insecurity in Africa, Asia and South America. These initiatives include a proposal made by the State of Qatar in September 2010, during the sixty-fifth session of the General Assembly, at the special side event entitled "Global Dry Land Alliance: Partnering for Food Security". The proposal is for a group of dryland countries to join together to form a global dryland alliance. The innovative solutions and best practices developed by such an alliance could be shared broadly with dryland countries throughout the world.

Another example is the African Union's Great Green Wall Initiative, which aims to tackle both environmental and poverty-related challenges and to address the effects of land degradation, increasing aridity and desertification in the African Sahara and the Sahel drylands by planting a wall of trees across Africa, from Senegal in the west to Djibouti in the east.

Initiatives such as these are designed to support and complement efforts towards tangible progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly MDG 1, which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

Land is life, and our life depends on land. We must stop the deadly process of desertification, restore health and vitality to our precious Earth and protect the livelihoods of people worldwide. This is our responsibility.

I now give the floor to His Excellency the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon.

The Secretary-General: Today, the drylands of the Horn of Africa are experiencing the most severe food crisis in the world. More than 13 million people in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. The United Nations and our partners are working hard to save lives and alleviate suffering.

But let me be frank. Drought does not have to become famine. Too often, the international community reacts too late. Too often, decisions are taken based on false economies. In the end, we count the cost not just in human lives but in the extra expense of responding to crises that could have been averted for a fraction of the price.

The world's drylands are too often an investment desert, seen by Governments and the international community as a lost cause. Nothing could be further from the truth. I thank the General Assembly for holding this High-level Meeting to highlight the fact that drylands hold the potential — both immediate and long-term — to drive national economic growth and sustainable human development.

Forty per cent of the Earth's land mass is characterized as arid or semi-arid. Two billion people depend on drylands for sustenance and income. Many are among the world's poorest and most vulnerable to hunger. Drylands also offer considerable potential for helping to mitigate the effects of climate change. Dryland carbon storage — mainly in the form of soil carbon — accounts for more than one third of the global stock.

So the incentive for the sustainable management of drylands is clear. Why, then, are we allowing these valuable lands, which support so many people, to deteriorate as a result of unsustainable land and water use and the impacts of climate change?

Let us resolve today to reverse this trend. Let us recognize that resisting desertification, preserving drylands and nurturing the communities that depend on them lies at the core of sustainable development.

Contrary to common perception, not all drylands are barren or unproductive. Some of the world's primary cereal-producing regions are in semi-arid areas. Communities and businesses everywhere are discovering the potential of drylands. Tibetan herders are selling yak wool for cashmere in worldwide luxury markets. Unique pelts are providing income for communities in the arid regions of Namibia, where conventional farming is impossible.

In other areas, biofuels grow where little else can. The potential of dryland solar and wind resources has barely been tapped. Timely action on our part can unlock these riches and provide solutions to a number of global challenges, from food insecurity to rural poverty, energy insecurity, biodiversity loss, climate change, political instability, geopolitical conflict and forced migration.

But to do this, we need enhanced investment in halting desertification and reclaiming degraded lands. Success stories can point the way, and success stories abound. From restoring ancient terraces in the Peruvian Andes, to planting trees to hold back the encroaching Saharan sands, from rehabilitating watersheds in India to using summer floods to reduce salinity in China, there are examples from all continents of Governments and communities reversing desertification and improving the productivity of the land.

But we must also acknowledge that land degradation is not just a dryland issue. Studies show that land degradation is occurring in humid, tropical areas at a faster rate than ever before. If this phenomenon is not reversed in time, it could roll back our efforts to eradicate poverty, achieve the Millennium Development Goals and achieve sustainable development.

As the climate warms, drought will emerge in new areas and become more frequent and intense. Drought and land degradation must therefore move to the centre of policy development. By refocusing our development agenda to include the potential of drylands, we can break the links between poverty and desertification, drought and land degradation.

The outcome of today's deliberations will feed into the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). We are still at the early stages of the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification and the 10-year strategic plan of the UNCCD.

Let us resolve today to work towards a world where there is no more land degradation. Let us make sustainable land use a cornerstone of the green

economy for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

I wish members and participants a productive meeting, and I count on their leadership and commitment.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank the Secretary-General for his statement.

I have been informed that the United States will speak in the opening segment in its capacity as host country. If I hear no objection, we shall proceed accordingly.

It was so decided.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I now give the floor to Mr. Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Mr. Gnacadja (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification): In 1992, the Earth Summit took the bold decision to address the issue of land degradation and drought, particularly in the drylands, through a legally binding treaty, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). This is the first time since its entry into force in 1996 that its core issues have been taken up by such a high-level political gathering.

Let me start by sharing the good news from this policy evolution. First, in the past two decades, significant land recovery and improvement have occurred in the drylands. In many cases, drylands populations have been leading these innovations and progress.

Secondly, we have accumulated a large amount of scientific knowledge about the drivers of land degradation, the extent of land degradation in different ecosystems, as well as its strong linkages with other global issues such as poverty and food insecurity, climate change and loss of biodiversity.

Thirdly, on the policy side, through the UNCCD's 10-year Strategy 2008-2018, the 194 parties to the Convention have agreed on a more focused and measurable approach to implementing the Convention.

I would have liked my intervention today to be all about good news. Unfortunately, I have to report that, despite the crippling effects of land degradation or soil nutrients depletion, the world has continued building towards a soil peak that will have far-worse consequences than the current oil peak. What are the threats, and why are they ignored?

The threats and far-reaching impacts of land degradation are ignored largely because the issue is still a blind spot for the international community, despite the search for sustainability. Our most significant non-renewable georesource is fertile land and soil. Nevertheless, each year an estimated 24 billion tons of fertile soil are lost. Arable land loss is estimated at 30 to 35 times the historical rate. In the drylands, due to drought and desertification, 12 million hectares of land are transformed into new man-made deserts every year. That is an area with the potential to produce 20 million tons of grain.

Globally, land degradation directly affects 1.5 billion people. It entrenches affected populations in poverty and hunger. For instance, when poverty is assessed in terms of infant mortality rate, 42 per cent of the very poor of the world live in degraded lands.

Most certainly, land degradation is a global phenomenon, with 78 per cent of the degrading land taking place in the non-dry lands. Degrading the buffer zone of the drylands increases their vulnerability to degradation. Furthermore, land degradation is stressing the world's food production system and contributing to its vulnerability to climatic shocks. In an increasingly interdependent world, land-related crises will mutate into new global crises.

As for drought, the percentage of Earth's land area stricken by serious drought more than doubled from the 1970s to the early 2000s, and the world is facing the possibility of widespread drought in the coming decades; but this has yet to be fully recognized by the international community. Unfortunately, despite being predictable, drought in our time still implies famine and claims lives. The tragic situation in the Horn of Africa is a stark reminder that we still have a long way to go.

Among the main challenges in implementing the Convention, low political recognition and the lack of mainstreaming in national strategic plans are foremost. However, addressing land degradation is not a burden on public budgets, but rather a driving force for sustainable and inclusive economic development. According to a recent review, the cost of land degradation in sub-Saharan Africa may be as much as 10 per cent of national gross domestic products.

My main message is that to sustain life on Earth we must build a land-degradation-neutral world. This will involve a global commitment leading to effective action at all levels. Therefore I call for action. I urge the leaders of our planet to adopt policy measures that will lead to a paradigm shift in the way we manage our land resources. Through bold political decisions and with the knowledge now available, we have the means to successfully address desertification, land degradation and drought. This is the raison d'être of the UNCCD. Through this process, hunger, poverty and famine can become history. We can do this and we must. I have no doubt that members will take the right decisions and lead us accordingly.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I now give the floor to the President of the ninth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, His Excellency Mr. Alberto D'Alotto, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of Argentina.

Mr. D'Alotto (Argentina) (*spoke in Spanish*): The topic before us today has enjoyed focused international attention this year, which has resulted in a better understanding at the global level of the importance of developing coordinated actions to combat this environmental, economic and social problem in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. I hope that this meeting will increase the engagement of the major actors on this issue at the highest institutional and political levels of this Organization. It will be a particular challenge for affected countries to define their priorities in the struggle in order to motivate the international community towards increased participation and cooperation at the technical and financial levels.

We face the major task of consolidating the efforts undertaken and progress made by States parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. In particular, I would like to underline the progress in some strategic issues for the Convention follow-up that took place under the Argentine Presidency of the ninth Conference of the Parties, including the recognition of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention as a permanent subsidiary body, which allowed the submission of the first reporting cycle after the 10-year strategy 2008-2018. I also highlight the establishment of new methodologies through the implementation of the performance review and assessment of implementation system for periodical and reliable information and data collection and analysis, and for the measurement and evaluation of trends of desertification at the global, national and local levels.

On the other hand, the institutional reform process within the Global Environment Facility has recently allowed the allocation of financial resources for the focal area on land degradation, transforming the Facility into the main financial mechanism of the Convention, increasing and broadening the continuity of relevant projects and initiatives.

On the basis of these important landmarks in our Convention's process, which took place under the Argentine presidency of ninth Conference of the Parties, and with a view to tenth, it is necessary for the international community and States parties take more and better decisions to advance the fight against desertification. To that end, it is necessary to have a framework to obtain scientific advice on issues relevant to the Conference of the Parties, and which also provides warning on possible crisis situations. However, that important technical advice should be respectful of the political processes of the Convention, ensuring that the recommendations are adopted by States parties at the different decision-making levels.

Argentina in particular has been deeply committed to the objectives of the Convention since their very beginning. This commitment is firmly determined by the geographic particularities of my country's territory, 75 per cent of which is made up of arid and semi-arid areas. These areas, however, produce 50 per cent of the country's wealth, generating important export credits that strengthen our economy, and pose a challenge in terms of sustainable development. In this respect, Argentina is fully conscious of the richness of these ecosystems from a productive and cultural point of view, and of the generation of external benefits and their vulnerability to climate issues and human activities.

For example, the National Action Programme to Combat Desertification is promoting local, productive sustainable development, the eradication of rural poverty and the creation of technology to control the advance or reversal of desertification. Efforts are also being coordinated at the regional and subregional level, including the Gran Chaco Americano project and other projects within MERCOSUR.

This presidency believes that the Convention is the best international legal instrument for developing more and better tools for combating desertification, land degradation and drought, and that its principal objective should be to improve the quality of life of the affected populations in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas, which are the subject of the Convention.

I hope that our deliberations in this Meeting allow us to make progress in strengthening and enhancing the activities that are being carried out with a view to improving the lives of the billions who live in areas affected by desertification in developing countries, who are among the poorest in the world and who are kept from achieving the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those related to hunger, poverty and sustainable development.

I will now speak on behalf of the Group of 77 and China for this segment of the High-level Meeting.

(*spoke in English*)

We welcome the convening of this debate today, and we would like to recall that desertification and land degradation affect all regions of the world and continue to pose a serious threat to sustainable development at the national, regional and global levels. We would like to emphasize also that these issues have repercussions on the functioning of the ecosystem and the Earth's system as a whole.

We would like to stress that developing countries are the most affected by these phenomena. The present situation of drylands in developing countries constitutes a matter of utmost concern to the Group of 77 (G-77) and China. With more than 1 billion inhabitants — who are among the poorest on the planet — we are the most constrained in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those relating to hunger, poverty and environmental sustainability.

The G-77 and China express their concern and solidarity over the situation that the population in the Horn of Africa region is experiencing right now. They have been hit by the worst drought in 60 years, which is leading to starvation and loss of crops and livestock. This reflects well the severity of the drought and desertification problems and the imperative for action.

For the G-77 and China, the objective of this High-level Meeting should be to contribute to raising awareness of desertification, land degradation and drought at the highest level, in line with the United Nations Decade for Deserts and the Fight against Desertification (2010-2020).

Therefore, it is important to reaffirm the case for the fulfilment of all commitments to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and its 10-year strategic plan and framework, ensuring in this way a higher priority for desertification, land degradation and drought on the international agenda and contributing to the preparations for the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20.

In this vein, it is worth remembering that that Conference was first held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to respond to developing countries' concerns and needs. Its objective was to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, and to do that through effective action at all levels, supported by international cooperation, in the framework of an integrated approach that is consistent with Agenda 21, with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development in affected areas. Therefore, the focus should continue to be on the situation in drylands, particularly in developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Regarding the report submitted by the Secretariat of the Convention to Combat Desertification, the G-77 and China fully reiterate their preliminary comments and input to this background document, as expressed during the informal consultations held on 23 May and submitted in writing on 23 and 30 May.

A fundamental point of this debate is how to ensure the full implementation of the Convention and the 10-year strategic programme. For the G-77 and China, this should be achieved in accordance with the principles and provisions of the relevant instruments on sustainable development, in particular, principles 2 and 7 of the Rio Declaration: the sovereign right of States to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies, and common but differentiated responsibilities.

May I here recall that the multilateral framework of the Convention requires international cooperation

and that the application of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities demands that developed countries provide new, additional, predictable and stable financing, transfer of technology and capacity-building for the implementation of actions on the ground.

Also, national action plans to combat desertification are programmes designed for activities related to the fight against desertification, as mandated by the Convention.

Therefore, the Group of 77 and China expect the summary of this meeting to reflect national strategies or programmes and the importance for developing countries to receive technical and financial support from the international community to adequately implement them, within the framework of the Convention. We should also stress the important role that regional coordination mechanisms must play, as established by the Parties, to support the implementation of regional annexes of the Convention to complement international support.

The Group is of the view that the Convention to Combat Desertification is lagging behind the achievements of the other Rio Conventions, namely the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity. A strong and clear political message should emerge from this high-level segment, reflecting that the Convention on Desertification must be put on equal footing and treated with the same importance as the Biodiversity Convention and the Climate Change Convention, and political support from developed countries to developing countries should be guaranteed.

It is vital to enhance cooperation among the Rio Conventions while respecting their individual mandates, out of concern over the negative impacts that desertification, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and climate change have on each other and recognizing the potential benefits of complementarities in addressing these problems in a mutually supportive manner.

The G-77 and China support the establishment and strengthening of existing disaster management capacities at all levels, including information and early warning systems that allow effective management of the risks associated with drought, desertification and land degradation and of the adverse impacts of climate change.

Poverty, food security and desertification are intrinsically linked to each other and need to be tackled jointly. Therefore, desertification, land degradation and drought should be addressed not only in terms of environmental impacts and economic growth but also in terms of their social impacts, recognizing the causes of desertification and the need to have a socially inclusive approach, and addressing inequalities.

Considering the impact of trade and relevant aspects of international economic relations on desertification and land degradation, we shall promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system, recognizing the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, focused on providing preferential access to products from developing countries and avoiding the implementation of trade protectionism and other trade-distorting measures. Subsidies applied in developed countries not only distort international trade but also lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources and, consequently, to land degradation.

We look forward to engaging in a constructive and meaningful debate today that pays due attention to the issues raised by developing countries and finds a way to address them effectively.

The President (*spoke in Arabic*): I now give the floor to the incoming President of the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, His Excellency Mr. Lee Don Koo, who is also Minister of Forest Service in the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Lee Don Koo (Republic of Korea): I am truly honoured to have this opportunity to deliver an address at this important High-level Meeting of the General Assembly. I am particularly delighted to be joined by distinguished leaders from all over the world.

We are gathering here at the Assembly's sixty-sixth session to deal with the very important theme of "Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication". I believe that the presence of those gathered here today signifies their utmost interest in examining the gravity of the issue.

Today, more than 12 million hectares of land are being lost every year to desertification, land degradation and drought. Three billion people are now in a state of serious poverty and one third of them live

in drylands, as evidenced in the UNDP study "The Forgotten Billion". Previously, the issue of desertification, land degradation and drought failed to receive the international attention it deserves and was considered only as the problem of those in drylands.

We have also witnessed the devastating and transboundary impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought, such as frequent floods, dust and sandstorms, landslides, loss of biodiversity and climate change. Hence, as this issue is increasingly recognized as an impending global concern, we need a new way of thinking.

Land and soil are the property not only of the present generation but also of future generations. We have the responsibility to use them in a sustainable way so as to enable our descendants to enjoy the benefits of healthy and productive ecosystems. Recognizing that for all generations land is indispensable to sustain decent lives, we need to reverse the history of negligence and shed new light on desertification, land degradation and drought. Thus, we need to find ways to promote the socio-economic benefits of the land and ensure conservation of the environment at the same time. That will require a paradigm shift from a growth-driven economy to a "green growth economy".

A new growth paradigm in Republic of Korea was put forth by President Lee Myung-bak in 2008, in pursuit of green growth and adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. President Lee Myung-bak pledged to exert himself for the country to achieve that, which led to the development of new polices on green growth nationwide.

Sustainable land management incorporating green growth would be an efficient and pragmatic approach to address desertification, land degradation and drought and improve long-term benefits from the environment. To succeed in sustainable land management, a long-term approach is needed, as it cannot be achieved in a short period of time.

I would also like to stress that green growth encompasses ecosystemic development, which is a new economic mechanism designed to encourage pro-poor policies at global, regional and national levels. A critical component of this is a win-win growth strategy that can enable both countries affected by desertification, land degradation and drought and developed countries to achieve a sustainable society through sustainable development.

I believe Korea can set a good example for affected countries. Its history of successful reforestation demonstrated well that sustainable land management can serve as a first step to break the dilemma of poverty, desertification, land degradation and drought. From the last of the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century, Korea was trapped in poverty and went through a chaotic period. However, with all-out efforts by the Government and people alike, we overcame the crisis and were able to establish a solid foundation for sustainable development through remarkable rehabilitation of degraded lands.

Mr. Zinsou (Benin), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Truly, the challenges ahead of us are daunting and cannot be dealt with easily. Let us remain bold, ambitious and creative to end the desertification, land degradation and drought that generate poverty and undermine sustainable development. We need a concerted effort and strengthened political commitment to join forces and mobilize the available resources. It is crucial to promote global partnerships, not only to combat desertification, land degradation and drought but also to move forward into a sustainable international community in which everyone can obtain a decent life, regardless of nationality, age and gender.

With the convening of the tenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification — COP 10 — in Korea, I hope that all here can participate in this significant event to discuss how we can solve in unison the dismal problems brought by desertification, land degradation and drought. It is worth pointing out that the first Business Forum on Sustainable Land Management will be launched on 17 and 18 October at the COP 10. It aims to encourage greater involvement and participation in promoting sustainable land management activities on the part of civil society and business people. I believe that the valuable participation and support of all here will greatly contribute to the success of COP 10 in Korea. I look forward to welcoming all.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Andris Piebalgs, European Commissioner for Development of the European Union.

Mr. Piebalgs (European Union): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU)

and its member States. Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Iceland, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this declaration.

We welcome this high-level event and the opportunity it provides us to turn our attention to this critical issue facing the global community. The issue of desertification and land degradation is one of the most serious threats to the livelihoods of the poorest people in developing countries today, where subsistence and prospects for improvement are based on the sustainable exploitation of natural resources. This problem not only has serious economic and environmental consequences; it also has significant political and social effects.

These problems, however, are not limited to developing countries; they have reached global dimensions. Within the European Union itself, 12 member States have declared themselves affected countries with substantial areas already subject to land degradation. In its current capacity as presidency of the European Union, Poland will continue to work actively in the areas of climate change, green economies and land degradation issues within the EU.

In order to address these challenges, there is a need for coherent policies, including those that formulate measures for affected countries aimed at tackling the problems at an early stage. At the same time, we need to recognize that pressures linked to growing populations, food insecurity and water shortages are often drivers of unsustainable land-use practices. Addressing land degradation and desertification also has significant benefits, with increased agricultural yields and enhanced ecosystem services.

In their external policies, the European Union and its member States have highlighted the importance of sustainable land-management policies that contribute to poverty alleviation and food security in the long term. The European Union funds a broad range of actions and programmes designed to address land degradation in developing countries. They promote sustainable land-management techniques that take into account local and regional conditions and seek to combine traditional knowledge with new and emerging technologies. Key examples of regional initiatives in Africa are the Sahara and Sahel Observatory; TerrAfrica, the Sub-Sahara-wide framework that promotes sustainable land management; and the Great Green Wall initiative of the Sahara and the Sahel, all of which are aimed at mitigating the risk of desertification while at the same time alleviating poverty.

The importance of land as a key resource has been highlighted in preparations for next year's United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in Rio de Janeiro. Rio+20 offers a unique opportunity to secure a renewed political commitment to sustainable development. In that framework, investing in sustainable land management is an integral part of achieving the shift to a green economy. In that context, we actively support the initiative on the economics of land degradation as a means of developing a clearer understanding of the full costs of land degradation. The global study aims to raise awareness of this issue and help policymakers implement effective strategies to address the problem, as well as to set out the incentives for private-sector investment in sustainable land-management policies.

Today, environmental and development challenges are linked. Sustainable land management has become vitally important, representing the missing link needed to tackle climate change, biodiversity loss and food insecurity. In that regard, the clear shared objectives among the three Rio conventions and the importance of taking coordinated action must be recognized.

As part of our commitment to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), together with the scientific community and civil society, we are ready to support improvement of the knowledge base on desertification and land degradation worldwide and to enable affected developing countries to implement national action plans. In that regard, the effective implementation of the UNCCD 10-year strategic plan (see ICCD/COP(8)/16/Add.1) is crucial, as is effective cooperation between the Convention bodies.

The European Union and its member States look forward to the forthcoming tenth Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (COP-10), which will take place in Changwon, Republic of Korea, next month. Coming at a key moment, less than a year before Rio+20, COP-10 is an opportunity to establish a new, concerted approach in order to enable us to effectively meet the

challenges of desertification and land degradation that the world faces today.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Jato Sillah, Minister for Forestry and the Environment of the Gambia, who will speak on behalf of the African States.

Mr. Sillah (Gambia): It is my pleasure and great personal privilege to deliver this statement on behalf of the African Group on the occasion of the High-level Meeting on the theme "Addressing desertification, land degradation and drought in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication". First, the Group aligns itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Argentina on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Desertification is a global issue, with serious implications for worldwide eco-safety, food security, socio-economic stability and sustainable development. Among the countries most affected are the African nations, which face serious difficulties in combating desertification, land degradation and meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The high level of rural poverty in many developing countries, particularly in Africa, continues to be among the most serious constraints on progress in combating desertification and land degradation.

At the same time, these problems exacerbate rural poverty in affected developing countries. We would like to stress that while every developing country is affected by these phenomena, the present situation of the drylands constitutes a matter of the utmost concern. With more than 1 billion inhabitants who are among the poorest on the planet, the African continent is the most constrained in its efforts to achieve the MDGs, particularly those relating to hunger, poverty and environmental sustainability.

This High-level Meeting therefore provides an opportunity to articulate and propose solutions to the difficulties encountered in fulfilling the commitments made during the World Summit on Sustainable Development and other related conferences and meetings. In this regard, we emphasize the importance of identifying the specific means of implementation that will enable developing countries, including those in Africa, to derive benefit from their commitments. This has become very urgent in light of the need to narrow the increasing gap between developed and developing countries.

Desertification and land degradation affect all regions of the world and continue to pose a serious threat to sustainable development at the national, regional and global levels. Poverty, food insecurity and desertification are intricately linked and must be tackled jointly.

The present situation of the drylands in developing countries — whose more than 1 billion inhabitants are among the poorest people on the planet — has constrained their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those goals related to hunger, poverty and environmental sustainability.

African countries remain committed to fulfilling their obligations under all multilateral agreements. However, the results achieved so far have been limited by the challenges posed by a number of global crises that have negatively impacted development and environmental efforts in the continent.

In addition to those issues, the continent continues to grapple with obstacles resulting from a basic lack of technology transfer and the inability to build and develop institutional capacities and enhance its human resources endowment, which, among other things, has suffered repeated forced displacement and the migration of highly qualified people to other regions. That phenomenon must be resolved through concerted efforts.

It is clear that the African Group needs a scientific panel to advise it on taking the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) forward. That applies to the entire UNCCD; we definitely need a scientific panel.

In this regard, we firmly call upon all parties to fully support the implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in all its aspects, in particular by promoting the exchange of knowledge on best practices and lessons learned through global and regional cooperation on combating desertification, land degradation and drought. Emphasis should also be placed on mobilizing and channeling adequate and predictable financial resources, as well as on facilitating their direct access in order to help mitigate the effects of desertification, land degradation and drought and to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable people affected by these most urgent matters at the national, subregional and regional levels.

The 10-year strategic plan and framework adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD has strengthened the commitment of the international community to implement the Convention at all levels. It has enabled the Convention to be more broadly engagement at the front line in combating desertification and land degradation, mitigating the effects of drought and contributing to the fight against climate change. In that respect, the UNCCD serves as a platform for adapting to climate change, mitigating its effects and strengthening resilience.

With respect to strengthened synergies among the three relevant Conventions, enhancing coordinated actions and opportunities of mutual benefit must be strongly encouraged efforts to combat desertification, preserve dryland ecosystems, conserve wet lands and combat climate change. It must be acknowledged that desertification, land degradation and drought are challenges of a cross-sector nature and global dimension because they affect all regions of the world. Thus, all relevant United Nations organizations and agencies and all parties concerned must cooperate with all stakeholders in supporting an effective global response to those grave and profound problems with a view to mitigating their effects and negative impact on the environment and the global economy.

To this end, the Group of African States reaffirms its commitment to initiatives such as the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and its 2008-2018 10-year strategic plan and framework to enhance implementation of the Convention, which is recognized as one of the tools for poverty eradication. The Group also stresses its deep concern over the negative impacts that desertification, land degradation, loss of biodiversity and climate change have on each other, and recognizes the potential benefits of complementarity in addressing those challenges through collective and effective action at all levels in a mutually supportive manner.

Africa is the most vulnerable and disadvantaged continent in the context of achieving the goals of socio-economic development. We therefore stress the importance of the international community fulfilling its commitments to supporting Africa in its efforts, as was promised at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Equally important is the urgent need to match promises with actual delivery on the assurances contained in the political declaration on Africa's development needs under the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and the conclusions reached by the Millennium Development Goals Africa Steering Group.

We stress that the provision of sufficient and predictable funding, the transfer of environmentally sound technologies, and support and encouragement aimed at building the human and institutional capacities of African countries will contribute significantly to achievement of the desired goals in the fields being considered at this High-level Meeting. International development cooperation can play a critical role in mobilizing resources for investment in the fight against desertification and land degradation and in improved technology and technology transfer to promote rural development. In this respect, we also underline the importance of increasing the quantity and quality of official development assistance, and of reducing or cancelling outright the external debt in favour of the neediest African countries.

As we all know, the African Union is the flagship organization for harmonizing and coordinating continental programmes in Africa. Despite the progress made in developing policies at regional and subregional levels, the implementation gap in Africa remains wide. We therefore call for the strengthening of support and encouragement of plans and programmes of the African Union and the regional economic communities to ensure the effective transfer of policies and programmes into concrete measures, especially in the field of sustainable development. Ensuring equitable access by farmers to regional and global markets, and providing practical help and capacity-building to those stakeholders in marketing agricultural products is essential to their willingness to invest in long-term sustainable land management, since they would then be able to reap the future rewards of such investment.

As we all know, forests play an important role in preventing both desertification and land degradation as well as in rehabilitating degraded lands. The implementation of the non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests, adopted by the General Assembly in 2007 (resolution 62/98, annex), provides a framework for advancing sustainable forest management and will contribute to combating desertification, mitigating climate change and preserving forest biological diversity.

Finally, integrating action programmes to combat desertification into development frameworks will serve as practical tool in combating desertification and implementing the UNCCD. Given that desertification cuts across all sectors, it is essential to ensure coordination among all relevant Government agencies at central and local levels in the implementation of national action plans, with the active involvement of civil society. It is therefore important to mainstream such actions plans within national development strategies and poverty reduction plans. Strengthening the support of the international community through bilateral, regional and subregional cooperation will remain crucial for implementing action programmes to combat desertification and land degradation.

The implementation of national action plans should be based on integrated approaches and supported by legislation. The modes of economic growth and means of production and consumption must be improved in order to achieve harmony between conservation and development, as well as a balance between economic and social benefits.

In conclusion, the African Group attaches great importance to the role of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development. We should continue to provide guidance and coordination on issues related to the integration of the three dimensions of socio-economic development, and more importantly, the means of their implementation.

The Acting President: I give the floor to Mr. Rajiv Shah, Administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, who will speak in his capacity as the representative of the host country.

Mr. Shah (United States of America): It is my honour to join the General Assembly today in focusing on the global challenges of drought, desertification and land degradation. Right now, these dangerous realities are threatening the lives and livelihoods of over 1 billion people who live in fragile dryland ecosystems. They severely limit our collective goals of promoting sustainable development, eradicating poverty and strengthening food security. They also limit and threaten our national security.

Nowhere is this challenge more critical and the need for action more pressing than in the Horn of Africa. There, the devastating consequences of famine are playing out before our eyes in the stories of women who have to watch their children literally die in their arms. We know that the Horn of Africa is experiencing its worst drought in 60 years, and that 3.3 million people — predominately women and children — are in need of emergency assistance. As the single largest humanitarian and development partner in the region, the United States is supporting life-saving aid, including food, water and medicines, for millions of people.

Although the American people will always provide aid in times of urgent need, emergency assistance is not the most efficient or lasting solution. The reality is that we must do more to prevent these crises in the first place. That is why President Obama launched a global food security initiative called "Feed the Future" to help countries develop their own resilient agricultural sectors and food systems so they can feed themselves over the long term.

Through these partnerships, Kenya has seen a more than 300 per cent increase in maize yields in certain western parts of the country, while vitamin A-enriched sweet potatoes are now reaching hundreds of thousands of malnourished children in Uganda, Mozambique and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

These achievements are the result of collective action. African Governments, the private sector, civil society and local farmers — mostly women — are increasing their investments in agriculture, adopting new innovations and technologies, and measuring results.

We believe that this new form of partnership extends through to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. The United States strongly supports the Convention and its clear mandate to focus on drylands to enable better results. Addressing desertification through long-term, sustainable land management and agricultural development is one of the most effective tools we have to prevent the crises that we are now seeing throughout the Horn and in other vulnerable regions.

In fact, as a nation, we have a long history of grappling with the devastating consequences of soil degradation and severe drought. As we speak, the State of Texas is enduring one of the worst one-year droughts in recorded history. In the 1930s, a prolonged catastrophe of drought, land degradation and food shortage led to the American Dust Bowl, resulting in the migration of 2.5 million people. As a result of our experiences, the United States fundamentally reformed

our strategies and methods of dryland management. We strengthened collaboration between local Governments and farmers, invested in agricultural universities to foster scientific innovations in farming practices and water management, and embarked on larger-scale efforts to manage our productive lands more sustainably.

An aggressive focus on science and improved technology has been a vital part of our approach. Therefore, the United States supports the proposed intergovernmental science policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services, which will cover dryland ecosystems as opposed to a separate, narrower science mechanism devoted solely to the Convention.

We remain committed to harnessing the power of science and technology to help transform global agriculture and improve the quality of natural resources. Across the international community, we now have the knowledge to establish stable, productive environments, dramatically improve crop yields, mitigate natural disasters and deliver results for vulnerable, often small-scale farm households.

In order to meet the challenge of poverty and hunger around the world, we have to invest in long-term solutions through "Feed the Future", focusing on connecting smallholder farmers to strong markets and harnessing advances in science and technology. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said, "The question is not whether we can end hunger; it is whether we will".

That is why "Feed the Future" is driving a new approach to global food security. In Tanzania, we are working in partnership with Governments, companies and other donors to make major investments in the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of that country. In regions vulnerable to drought — like the Ethiopian highlands — we are focusing particularly on drought-resistant crops and improved soil, water and land management.

These efforts build on 40 years of experience the United States Government and the United States Agency for International Development have had in greening the Sahel, where farmer led agroforestry and water management techniques have transformed 50 million hectares threatened by desertification — an area larger than Sweden — into sustainably productive lands.

We welcome ongoing collaboration with the global community to help address the crisis in the Horn, and continue in particular to call on Al-Shabaab to allow unfettered humanitarian access in areas it controls. Hundreds of thousands of lives are at stake.

But responding to the crisis today is not only a moral imperative; it also protects our national and global security. In regions where we witness scarcity of resources today, we are more prone to face heightened tensions and conflicts tomorrow. By fighting drought and famine in the Horn today, we fight the despair that can lead people towards violence and terrorism. When we can help a nation feed itself through good times and bad, we break the cycle of food riots, famines and failed States that creates instability throughout our world. When we help a woman farmer use cutting-edge technologies to increase her harvests, we expand her country's economic potential and develop new markets for international trade. And by providing help in times of desperate need, we express globally shared values of compassion, dignity and equality.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker for the opening segment of the High-level Meeting.

As members are aware, pursuant to resolution 65/160, this High-level Meeting will comprise opening and closing plenary meetings as well as two panel discussions. The first panel will take place this morning in Conference Room 4 of the North Lawn Building, immediately after the adjournment of this opening segment.

The meeting rose at 11 a.m.